Saving Place: 50 Years of New York City Landmarks
Museum of the City of New York
21 April 2015–3 January 2016

New York City’s landmarks law is fifty years old, and to celebrate this milestone the Museum of the City of New York mounted an exhibition to tell the story. Using both historic documents and contemporary photographs, the curators (Andrew S. Dolkart and Donald Albrecht, with Seri Worden) told this story well, from the demolition of the 1803 St. John’s Chapel in 1918 through the enactment of the law itself in 1965 to the continuing efforts of preservationists to protect the historic city in the twenty-first century. If I had one quibble it was that they made it all seem so easy, so inevitable. The conflicts and controversies were there—the loss of Pennsylvania Station and the fights to save Grand Central Terminal and the Broadway theaters, the long campaign to protect Greenwich Village, the battle over a tower proposed for St. Bartholomew’s Church on Park Avenue—but they were presented in a rather cool and bloodless fashion. Where were the anger and the passion, of which there had been plenty? The story told by the exhibition ended triumphantly, even though new voices with new arguments seek to undermine the landmarks law today.

New York City today proves that preservation is crucial to a prosperous and livable city. This is a triumphant story, the victory of history and sentiment and aesthetics over commerce and shortsighted interests. The irony, of course, is that the citizens had to fight for the right to protect their city and to have their affection for their city respected.

The exhibition was organized chronologically in four sections: “Prelude to the Law,” “Sparking the Law, 1945–1965,” “Defending the Law, 1965–1978,” and “The Law in Action, 1978–2015.” Each section highlighted how New Yorkers engaged what in 1845 Walt Whitman called the city’s “pull-down-and-build-over-again spirit.” What the exhibition made clear was that there was always a countervailing spirit, a strong public interest in history and historic architecture, and an almost visceral rejection of proposals threatening the historic city, such as Robert Moses’s plan to demolish Castle Clinton at the lower tip of Manhattan to make way for a bridge and the red skyscraper slated to rise where Carnegie Hall stood. One can only marvel at the tone-deaf hubris of those supporting that proposal, but still, the Landmarks Preservation Commission did nothing to block the demolition of the elegant Metropolitan Opera House in 1967. The exhibition highlighted one of the most eloquent preservation stories that took place prior to the enactment of the law, the transformation of the Jefferson Market Courthouse in Greenwich Village into a public library, introducing the new concept of adaptive reuse. Appropriately, two giants of preservation were given their due in that section: Margot Gayle, who pushed to save the courthouse (and later founded Friends of Cast Iron Architecture and advocated for the SoHo Historic District), and architect Giorgio Cavaglieri, whose design remains a landmark of preservation.

The loss of Pennsylvania Station (McKim, Mead & White, 1910) held a central place in the exhibition, complete with a display of the New York Times editorial penned by architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable: “Until the first blow fell no one was convinced that Penn Station really would be demolished or that New York would permit this monumental act of vandalism. . . . We will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed.” Tragic as that loss was, the curators made clear that the destruction of Penn Station was not the impetus for the landmarks law; rather, it was the public outcry over the demolition of the Brokaw Mansion on Fifth Avenue that finally pushed a committee approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. This section presented a “greatest hits” collection, as well as a few misses. Visitors could view a model of Sir Norman Foster’s glass-and-metal tower above the Hearst Building (Joseph Urban, 1928) and decide for themselves whether it is “appropriate,” the term in the law for acceptable new construction. The wall text explained that “this open-ended concept has left it up to different generations of commissioners to interpret the word when reviewing proposals.” The exhibition made it clear that the commission did not back away from modernist solutions—indeed, it even encouraged them, beginning in 1970 with the very first new building approved by the commission, a Jehovah’s Witnesses dormitory and library in Brooklyn Heights (Ulrich Franzen and Associates). Another prominent example is the Greenwich Village town house rebuilt in 1978 to a modernist design by Hugh Hardy; the 1845 Greek revival original had been destroyed in 1970 when radicals used it as a bomb factory.

Above all else, the exhibition demonstrated that preservation is not about the past. Rather, it is integral to the living city. All the contemporary color photographs of landmarks showed them not in idealized poses but as they are experienced: automobiles parked in front; angry demonstrators blocking a sidewalk; scaffolding cluttering a façade; pedestrians talking on cell phones, oblivious to their surroundings. The images were heavily weighted toward Manhattan and Brooklyn, however, with Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island represented by only a handful of landmarks. Finally, many of the individuals whose names and faces populated this show are still alive and still fighting for preservation, because the losses continue. If this exhibition offered one message, it was that only the dedication of New Yorkers has prevented the city from destroying itself. And no, it has not been easy.

JEFFREY A. KROESSLER
John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York
The SAAL Process: Housing in Portugal 1974–76

The exhibition presented complex narratives through a variety of visual aids, including analyses of the communities with which the brigades worked. Highlights included slides, digitized photographs, and videos, all of which contributed to the building of a narrative around the SAAL process. Exhibited were not only the architectural interventions but also the creative and performative elements that were crucial for the social and political impact. The curatorial team took care to present the exhibits in a way that facilitated visitor engagement, producing an exhibition that was both informed and immersive. The curatorial approach combined a strong archival research base with a focus on participatory models of engagement, ensuring the narrative was informed and interactive.

Notes

Related Publication
Donald Albrecht and Andrew S. Dolkart, eds., Sacting Place: 50 Years of New York City Landmarks (New York: Monacelli Press, 2015), 208 pp., 110 color and 27 b/w illus. $50, ISBN 9781580934312